

Introduction: Bureaucrats in Uniform

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This special issue deals with ‘bureaucrats in uniform’, an expression by which we like to designate the different administrative agents who have the task of enforcing the law through the legal use of violence, ranging from policemen to provincial and national guards, gendarmes, forest agents, customs officers, and so on.¹ There are at least three reasons for studying this particular group of state agents.

The first reason is factual and empirical: bureaucrats in uniform – together with the primary school sector (Bierschenk 2007) – represent a large proportion of state employees in Africa (almost half of them in some countries). Heirs of the oldest colonial administrative bodies (Glasman 2014), these agents nowadays play a central role in the day-to-day workings of the state, are the backbone of everyday administration and have the largest influence on people’s perception of the state.² This is probably the reason why international development organisations such as UNDP, USAID or DFID are increasingly targeting this group of civil servants in their development programmes, either in the field of Security Sector Reform (SSR) or in New Public Management. In spite of this interest in bureaucrats in uniform in international institutions, scholarly literature on the topic is very sparse, especially regarding Africa.

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² Focusing on the relation between state agents and state users, this special issue thus pursues the theoretical and empirical project named ‘state at work’ by Bierschenk (Bierschenk 2010). See also: Debos/Glasman 2013.